Book club in a Bag

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Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
Ava's Man

Author: Rick Bragg

Born c. 1959, in Possum Trot, AL; son of Margaret Marie Bragg. Education: Harvard University.
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Name: Rick Bragg
Born: 1959
Education: Harvard University
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Tuscaloosa, AL 35487

Career:
Journalist and memoirist. Worked as reporter for various Alabama newspapers; worked as a reporter for *St. Petersburg Times*, St. Petersburg, FL, and *New York Times,* New York, NY.

Awards:
Nieman fellowship, Harvard University; Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, 1996, for coverage of Oklahoma City bombing; American Society of Newspaper Editors Distinguished Writing Award (twice); University of Alabama Clarence Cason Award for Nonfiction Writing, 2004.

Writings:
All Over but the Shoutin', Pantheon (New York, NY), 1997, published as *Redbirds: Memories from the South*, Harville Press (London, England), 1999.
(With Walker Evans) *Wooden Churches: A Celebration,* Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1999.
Somebody Told Me: The Newspaper Stories of Rick Bragg, University of Alabama Press (Tuscaloosa, AL), 2000.
Ava's Man, Knopf (New York, NY), 2001.
(Author of foreword) *Best of the Oxford American: Ten Years from the Southern Magazine of Good Writing*, Hill Street Press (Athens, GA), 2002.
I Am a Soldier Too: The Jessica Lynch Story, Knopf (New York, NY), 2003.
The Prince of Frogtown, Knopf (New York, NY), 2008.

Media Adaptations:
Ava's Man was recorded on compact disc and released by Random Audio, 2001. *All Over but the Shoutin'* was narrated by Bragg and released as an audiobook produced by Random Audio, 1997.

Sidelights:

In his acclaimed memoir, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, Rick Bragg describes his personal journey from harsh childhood to national renown as a prize-winning journalist. A reporter who won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing, Bragg pays special homage in his memoir to his mother, Margaret, for her heroic efforts to provide her children a good home despite nearly insurmountable hardships.

Bragg grew up in Possum Trot, Alabama, located in the Appalachian foothills on the border between Alabama and Georgia. He was the second of three sons, a fourth having died in infancy. The family was very poor,

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surviving on a fifty-dollar-per-month Social Security check in addition to what Margaret Bragg made as a field hand. Bragg's father, a Korean War veteran who became a physically abusive alcoholic and died at age forty, was rarely present; when he was, he often beat Margaret. She withstood mistreatment stoically and bestowed a compensating love on her children, which enabled Bragg to find eventual success as a writer. All in all, his childhood, Bragg wrote in *All Over but the Shoutin'*, was "full, rich, original and real," as well as "harsh, hard, mean as a damn snake." "I am not a romantic figure," he added, "...but I have not led a humdrum life."

After graduating from high school, Bragg spent six months in college, then landed a job at a local newspaper after the paper's first choice for the job opening decided to remain in a fast-food restaurant position instead. After moving on to the *St. Petersburg Times*, Bragg covered Hurricane Andrew, problems in Haiti, and riots in Miami before spending a year at Harvard University on a Nieman fellowship. Subsequently, he joined the *New York Times*, covering the Susan Smith child murders and the U.S. intervention in Haiti.

In 1996 Bragg's coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing earned him the Pulitzer Prize. He brought his mother to New York City by plane for the awards ceremony; she had not only never been on a plane, or on an escalator, or in New York, but she had not bought a new dress in eighteen years. Bragg describes the prize ceremony in *All Over but the Shoutin'* and the scene is, according to Diane Hartman in the Denver Post, "the best in the book." Bragg also memorably recounts his cash purchase, with his prize money and book profits, of a new house for his mother. *Seattle Times* contributor Chris Solomon concluded that *All Over but the Shoutin'* is a "well-received effort to enshrine a saint (his mother), exorcise a demon (his father) and tell his own Horatio Alger story."

Many reviewers have praised Bragg's gripping real-life story, though the enthusiasm has been tempered by some of the story's psychological residue. For Hartman a maudlin tone, born of "survivor's guilt," enters the writing at points—"but Bragg is good and there's no denying it," she concluded. A writer for *Library Journal* recommended *All Over but the Shoutin'* highly for its "honest but unsentimental" style, its "plainspoken and lyrical" effects, and its "telling" details. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor, however, called the book "uneven" and "jolting," referring to it as "a mixture of moving anecdotes and almost masochistic self-analysis" but nonetheless praising Bragg's "gift for language." Similar admiration was expressed by *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer Charles McNair, who considered the memoir a "heartbreaking, inspiring account" that "is no sentimental, soft-lens nostalgic piece, but an uncomfortably honest portrait of growing up with less than nothing, a memoir fraught with sharp edges and hard truths."

Bragg's prequel to *All Over but the Shoutin'*, titled *Ava's Man*, is, as he told *Book* writer Anthony DeCurtis, a "necessary response to his readers' righteous demands" after reading *All Over but the Shoutin'*. In this book he tells the story of his maternal grandparents, Ava and Charlie Bundrum. Because he knew few details about the lives of his grandparents, he had to reconstruct the story from an oral history he collected from his mother, aunts and uncles, and other family members and friends. These friends and relatives had rich tales to tell about Charlie Bundrum, a man who was much loved and admired. Bragg had never met his grandfather, as he died the year before Bragg's birth, but he did rely on his own recollections of his grandmother Ava, who lived on thirty-six years after her husband's death.

Charlie Bundrum raised his family in the Deep South during the heart of the economic depression of the 1930s, and moved his wife and eight children twenty-one times, determined to do whatever it took to keep his family fed and safe. Bundrum worked as a roofer and general laborer, as well as a bootlegger, for most of his life. While he developed a taste for the illegal corn liquor, which eventually killed him at a young age, he never let alcohol run his life. Bragg depicts his grandfather, in DeCurtis's words, as "a moonshine maker who worked hard and fiercely protected his family; loved to fight, fish, and tell stories, and cared little for any law but the unspoken, unquestioned code of his community."At one point in Bragg's story, Bundrum gets arrested for vagrancy, based on his appearance, while trying to get home from a fishing trip. This was not an uncommon experience for poor

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white men living in Appalachia during the 1940s. Anthony Day in the *Los Angeles Times* pointed out that Bragg is one of the first authors to tell the story of poor whites in the south from an insider's perspective, and noted that Bragg writes "honestly and affectionately" regarding this topic. Robert Morgan, in the *New York Times Book* Review, acknowledged that "relatively few authors have truly caught the voice of the Southern working class," and in *Ava's Man* the characters and setting "grab you from the first sentence." Morgan went on to call *Ava's Man* "a kind of sublime testimonial" and added: "Bragg gets the combination of sentiment and independence and fear in this culture just right."

For Bragg, writing *Ava's Man* was an opportunity to acquaint himself with the grandfather he never knew and to build a monument to this beloved man. Though *Orlando Sentinel* writer John Harper found the book "structurally weak," a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* reported that "Bragg delivers, with deep affection, fierce familial pride, and keen, vivid prose."

In 2003 Bragg was selected by Knopf to write the story of one of the first women to be injured in active duty while serving in the U.S. military. Discussing *I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story* with *Publishers Weekly* interviewer Charlotte Abbot, Bragg noted that the appeal of writing the book lay primarily in the "wonderful story" Lynch, a soldier fighting in the War on Terror in Iraq, has to tell. "What happened was unexpected: a nineteen-year-old supply clerk was pressed into driving a truck into a war. It was an unscripted drama. Some people died, others got broken. But at least where Jessie is concerned there's a win. I've written so many stories where there wasn't a win...Jessie wanted to see what was 'on the other side of the holler.' These are people who fight and die and serve their country, and they deserve some good attention, something beyond the sneers of intellectuals."

Further Readings:

Periodicals:

Book, September, 2001, Anthony DeCurtis, "Southern Grit," p. 53.
Booklist, September 15, 1997, p. 182; June 1, 2001, Joanne Wilkinson, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 1795.
Denver Post, October 5, 1997, Diane Hartman, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*.
Entertainment Weekly, November 21, 2003, Tina Jordan, review of *I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story,* p. 88.
Geographical, September, 1999, Chris Martin, review of *Redbirds: Memories from the South*, p. 71.
Kliatt, January, 1999, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*, p. 23.
Library Journal, September 15, 1997, p. 81; January 5, 1998; September 1, 1999, Russell T. Clement, review of *Wooden Churches: A Celebration*, p. 186; November 15, 1999, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*, p. 115; May 1, 2000, Pam Kingsbury, review of *Somebody Told Me: The Newspaper Stories of Rick Bragg*, p. 128; June 15, 2001, Pam Kingsbury, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 81; September 1, 2001, Pam Kingsbury, "Building Himself a Grandfather," p. 194.
Los Angeles Times, October 12, 2001, Anthony Day, "An Affectionate Portrait of the South's Poor, Hard-Living Whites," p. E3.
Mississippi Quarterly, winter, 1999, Amy E. Weldon, "When Fantasy Meant Survival," p. 89.
New York Times, September 10, 2001, Theodore Rosengarten, "Hammer-Swinging Roofer, Not a Hillbilly, in Appalachia," p. E6.
New York Times Book Review, June 25, 2000, Ruth Bayard Smith, review of *Somebody Told Me*; September 2, 2001, Robert Morgan, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 9.
Orlando Sentinel, September 19, 2001, John Harper, review of *Ava's Man*.
Publishers Weekly, July 14, 1997, p. 73; August 6, 2001, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 74; September 8, 2003, Charlotte Abbot, "Bragg: Lynch Has a 'Wonderful Story to Tell,'" p. 16.
Rapport, May, 1999, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*, p. 39.

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San Francisco Chronicle, September 16, 2001, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 68.
Sarasota Herald Tribune, November 5, 2000, Thomas Becnel, "Bragg Shares What Somebody Told Me," p. E5; November 4, 2001, Susan L. Rife, "Bragg's Portrait of Grandfather Is Revealing and Very Human," p. E5.
Seattle Times, October 30, 1997, Chris Solomon, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*.
Times Literary Supplement, October 16, 1998, Charles McNair, "The Struggle So Far," p. 34.
Washington Post, August 19, 2001, Fred Chappell, "Hardscrabble," p. T4.*

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Spotlight on:
Ava's Man

Reviews:

The New York Times Book Review, September 2, 2001
Relatively few writers have truly caught the voice of the Southern working class. Rick Bragg writes about the same kind of families, and laborers James Agee immortalized in "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." But where Agee approached their lives from the outside, Bragg writes from inside the culture. The family he tells us about is his own. Often he lets the people speak for themselves, and the authenticity of the voices and the setting grab you from the first sentence.

As he revealed so memorably in his previous memoir, *All Over but the Shoutin'* a tribute to his mother's struggle to raise a family on her own, Bragg really is from the dirt-poor working class in northeastern Alabama, in the foothills of the Appalachians. Like so many people from that background, he spent the first half of his life escaping hardship and hard labor, and is devoting the second half to writing about them. In his new book, *Ava's Man,* a memoir about his maternal grandfather, Bragg writes: "A man like Charlie Bundrum doesn't leave much else, not title or property, not even letters in the attic. There's just stories, all told second- and thirdhand, as long as somebody remembers. The thing to do, if you can, is write them down on new paper."

Readers have become fascinated in recent years with portraits of rural Appalachian life. We've reached a point in our digital world, of Web sites, e-mail and shopping malls where we have lost touch with our rural and working-class origins. There is a need for and a satisfaction in stories like Bragg's. We're hungry to connect with what made us who we are. Charlie Bundrum, Grandma Ava's man, was a great talker and storyteller, and the gift obviously was passed down to the grandson: "Charlie Bundrum was what women here used to call a purty man, a man with thick, sandy hair and blue eyes that looked like something you would see on a rich woman's bracelet. His face was as thin and spare as the rest of him, and he had a high-toned, chin-in-the-air presence like he had money, but he never did."

It is the rhythm, the breaks and pauses, that make Bragg's sentences work. Bragg is a national correspondent for *The New York Times*—he won a Pulitzer Prize for feature writing in 1996—and in *Ava's Man* his style works like an amphetamine. You feel alert reading him. He creates a kind of sub-lime testimonial. Much of Charlie's life is a tall tale of giant catfish, fist fights, squirrels caught by hand. Bragg gets the combination of sentiment and independence and fear in this culture just right. The people have deep, often unspoken, feelings and loyalties. They are self-reliant and proud, yet they have an abiding fear of outsiders, the rich and powerful, and especially of change.

Bragg never knew Charlie. *Ava's Man* is based almost entirely on stories passed down in the family. The Bundrums were Huguenots who arrived here in the 18th century and drifted over much of the South. This book makes a whole world come alive, a world where Bundrum men farmed and logged, fought and loved, danced and drank and were being constantly "run off" from one place or another. They are known for their buck dancing and their toughness and cussedness. Bragg's great-grandfather, Jimmy Jim Bundrum, was known for his "disturbing fury." He once bit a man's finger off in a fight.

The women are different. In hard times they don't eat until their children have eaten. Ava has a terrible temper and a sharp tongue, but mostly she works and protects her children. Through all the moving, often several times a year, she hangs on to a few precious things: a family Bible, her collection of cheap pocketbooks, a kerosene lamp for reading the Atlanta paper.

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Charlie was the kind of man who worked hard at roofing and digging wells when he could get work; he fished and hunted when he couldn't. When he had the chance he liked to loaf and tell stories, play with his children and grandchildren. He could not read, and his wife read the newspaper to him. His family lived mostly on cornbread and pinto beans, and milk when they had a cow. Supper for poor folks was usually cornbread and milk. As a young man Charlie was called "whistle britches," because of the holes in his overalls —and perhaps because he lived mostly on beans. He was skinny and strong as iron. The most vivid detail Braggmentions is his hands. "The hands were magnificent. They hung at the ends of his skinny arms like baseball mitts, so big that a normal man's hand disappeared in them. The calluses made an unbroken ridge across his palm, and they were rough, rough all over, as shark's skin. The grease and dirt, permanent as tattoos, inked his skin, and the tar and dirt colored the quick under his fingernails, then and forever."

Like the other men in his family, Charlie drank, but not in front of his children. Even when drunk he is never violent but happy and prone to sing. And he makes moonshine in small quantities, to drink himself, and sometimes to sell. Charlie has his own strict code of morality. He and Ava survive the death of a child, and they move 21 times during the Depression in their Model A or their cut-down Plymouth. They take in a river bum named Hootie, who lives with them for several years. Wherever they go Ava carries her kerosene lamp, Bible and cheap pocketbooks.

One of the splendid motifs of *Ava's Man* is the cooking. Bragg describes in detail how you prepare cornbread, beans, catfish, hush puppies, iced tea. Bragg describes his mother Margaret as a girl eating her first hot dog: it "came wrapped in wax paper, the bun warm and soft, the smell of raw onions, spicy meat and chili filling the car, and she rode the rest of the way full as a tick, mustard on her cheeks."

Ava was devout, but Charlie didn't go to church. He drove Ava and the girls there and sat outside during the service. But through all the hardships he is a man who relishes life and freedom. Even his drinking does not alter his good nature.

After World War II, however, things begin to change, even in rural Alabama. Charlie doesn't, fit in the world that is coming into being. He is too big, too independent. "Charlie fit better in the past of the river, of these foothills, than in the here and now," Bragg writes. "The new blacktop highways, reaching all the way from the mist-covered hills to the wire grass and lowlands to the south; signaled the region's future. Charlie, who still used a broken branch as a fish stringer, was its history." One of the strangest events in Charlie's story is his arrest, for vagrancy. Caught in a flood on a fishing trip, he must take a bus home. Wearing old clothes, with little money in his pocket, he is jailed and unable to let anyone know where he is. For two weeks he stews behind bars. It is another sign that his day has passed.

Near the end of his life, Charlie, who never had any use for preachers or churches, gets saved. As always, he does it in his own way, at his own time. He wakes up his daughter Margaret in the middle of the night and announces: "I'm saved. The Lord has saved me." Charlie immediately stops drinking. He does not attend church, but he is a changed man. "People get saved in the tomato patch," Bragg writes. "They get saved driving to get a pack of Winstons, or get saved watching wrestling. Some people might laugh at it, but then they probably never heard music from the stars and a voice in the sky."

He may have been saved, but it's too late to reverse the effects of years of heavy drinking. Charlie's liver is being eaten away by cirrhosis; he wastes to a specter of his former sell. To spare the emotionally fragile Ava, he moves

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in with his toughest daughter, Edna. One windy day, even though he is weak and in pain, Charlie walks outside with his son-in-law and a friend. "The men were passing a pasture gate when he just stopped, to get a breath. He looked around him, as if it was the first time he had seen anything like it, anything so fine, and fell onto the new grass."

Half the county comes to Charlie's funeral. Cars are parked for a mile along the blacktop road by Tredegar. Congregational Holiness Church. Rough men he had worked with and fought with cried like babies during the service. Women viewing him in the pine box remarked that he was still a pretty man. In death he wore a blue suit, but his hands were still cracked and rough.

Ava's Man stays with you long after you put it down. Bragg's story of his grandparents makes you want to do better, to be more honest with yourself. It is hard to think of a writer who reminds us more forcefully and wonderfully of what people and families are all about.

Morgan, Robert. "Down home: Rick Bragg reconstructs the rural South during the Depression in a fond portrait of a grandfather he never knew." *The New York Times Book Review.* 106.35 (Sept. 2, 2001): *Book Review* Desk: p 9.

Booklist Review, June 2001
[*Starred Review*] Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Bragg paid tribute to his resilient mother in *All Over but the Shoutin'* (1997); now he tells the story of his grandfather, Charlie Bundrum. When Bragg asked his aunts why he had heard so little about his grandfather on his mother's side of the family, the response was tears. "What kind of man was this, I wondered, who is so beloved, so missed, that the mere mention of his death would make them cry forty-two years after he was preached into the sky? A man like that probably deserves a book." And what a book this is. Employing the same spare eloquence that marked his previous memoir, Bragg conjures a tall, bone-thin man who worked as a roofer, liked to run a trotline baited with chicken guts across the Coosa River and caught washtubs full of catfish, who made good whiskey in the pines, liked the taste of his own product, and loved to sing, laugh, talk, and buck-dance. Despite harsh poverty, Charlie displayed an unapologetic, hard-eyed independence and outran many a revenuer. In creating an indelible portrait of his grandfather, Bragg also brings alive a particular time and place, showing us just how much we've lost even as we've made "progress."

Library Journal Review, June 2001
Bragg, national correspondent for the *New York Times* and author of the best-selling memoir *All Over but the Shoutin',* here resumes his family history. In the introduction, he repeats the question readers often asked about his mother where did her heart and backbone come from? Responding to readers' concern that he'd given short shrift to his mother's parents, Ava and Charlie Bundrum, the author set out to re-create the life of a grandfather who died before Bragg was born. This could not have been easy; 42 years after his death, Charlie Bundrum's children could not talk about him without weeping. They knew that no one could replace his unconditional love, appetite for life, and ability to chase away fear with storytelling and laughter. His death shredded their hearts. Bragg writes with compassion and honesty about this man, who earned his living as a roofer, a bootlegger, a carpenter, and a fisherman. No one writes about the South like Bragg. He reminds readers that the fabled agrarians weren't the only Southerners, as he refuses to whitewash the bootleggers, violence, and poverty of the Depression-era rural South. Bragg's empathy and humanity shine throughout. Highly recommended for all libraries. Pam Kingsbury, Alabama Humanities Fund, Florence

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BookPage Review, September 2001
Not bragging, just good Southern storytellin'
There's just something about Southerners. "When they start telling a story, they roll with it," says Rick Bragg, a Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* reporter, who has told a story or two himself. "Their sense of timing, drama, irony is just beautiful. They can tell you a story and you'll be laughing so hard you'll have to lie down on the carpet. It's the same way with the sad stories, and the language is just prettier."

The happiness, the pain, the rich language and the soul of the South are alive in Bragg's new book, *Ava's Man,* a profile of the author's maternal grandfather. It's the natural follow-up to *All Over but the Shoutin',* Bragg's best-selling memoir of growing up poor in the Alabama hills, the son of an alcoholic father and a mother determined to provide for her kids. Many readers of *Shoutin'* wanted to know how Bragg's mother, Margaret, acquired her indomitable spirit. For Bragg, the answer was clear: Margaret's spunk came from her father, Charlie Bundrum. But Bragg had one problem writing a book about this fascinating man - he never knew his grandfather. "He died in the spring of 1958, one year before I was born," the author writes. "I have never forgiven him for that."

Without Charlie to interview, Bragg mined his own family for the stories he tells in *Ava's Man*. "We kind of built him up from dirt level," says the author, speaking from his home in New Orleans. "Physical description, personality, foibles and outright flaws, we put 'em all in there—much to my Aunt Gracie Juanita's chagrin." Charlie as Bragg portrays him wasn't perfect, just real—a moonshine-drinking, raw-boned man with big ears and a bigger heart.

As a *New York Times* reporter, Bragg interviews people for a living. However, in his research for *Ava's Man*, he found that interviewing strangers is one thing; interviewing his own family was another story.

"It was nerve-wracking," he says. "These are your people. You don't want to say anything that will cause them pain." He also discovered a downside to the Southern art of storytelling. "They'd get right to the good part" of a recollection about Charlie and a dog, "and then one of them would say, 'You know I had a dog like that.' The story will take a hard right turn and that turn will branch off like a roadmap. It can take three or four hours to steer your mom back to where they started. There were stories they started I still don't know the end to."

But over time and over tales, Charlie came alive for the author, who recognizes much of his grandfather in himself, for good or for bad. "Charlie loved more than anything else on earth the curves in living," says Bragg. "He didn't want a long straightaway, he loved the unexpected, and I do, too. That's why I do what I do for a living. He had a terrible temper and mine is...I wouldn't say legendary but it's pretty damn well known. He wanted to tell you a story, and I sure do love to tell one. I hope when I open my mouth, a little bit of him pours out."

Though the two share storytelling skills, Bragg differs from Charlie in other ways. Charlie was a skilled carpenter; Bragg's brothers have been known to laugh when he picks up a hammer. And though Bragg is proud he doesn't own a suit, he has never had to endure hardship like Charlie, who kept his family going through the Depression.

A devoted father who loved his seven children, Charlie "did the things you have to do to keep them. He worked himself to the bone to give them everything he could. I'll take risks. He took responsibilities." It is a choice that Bragg, single and childless at 41, may never face himself.

In writing *Ava's Man*, Bragg preserves not only his grandfather, but the Southern storytelling tradition that pieced Charlie together for him. "You can't assume storytelling stops at the county line, but I believe we have a richer

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tradition of storytelling," says Bragg. "It's deeper and wider. You can't walk down the street without hearing a good story."

That, he worries, may change. Popular culture and gentrification are robbing the South of all that makes it unique. "The deep South, the South I really know, is just as endangered as the rain forest. Accents become more bland, country music used to be Merle Haggard who'd gone to prison, Johnny Cash, who had a dark soul. Now these singers wear hip hop clothes and Versace. Faith Hill and Shania Twain are beautiful but about as country as Siegfried and Roy."

If *All Over but the Shoutin'* and *Ava's Man* have made Bragg the poster boy of Southern storytelling, he enjoys using his reporting skills to show the world how the South really is. "People assume racism has some particular claim down here. I've lived all over the country, and there's no line of demarcation. Some of the most miserably racist places I've been have had nothing to do with the South," says Bragg, who then waxes eloquent about grits.

He wrote most of *Ava's Man* quickly, passionately. He stopped cold as he approached the ending, where Charlie dies. "I couldn't kill him. I tried and I tried. I'd call my mother or her sisters, [and say] 'Tell me something that can help me through this.' But I just didn't want to kill him," says Bragg. When he was able at last to reach the end, "I felt a sense of loss I've never had. I'm a reasonably tough man. I've been shot at and beat up, but this was awful."

To compensate, Bragg added "my favorite thing I've ever written in my life, about if he had lived five or six more years. I would have known everything. He would have taken me fishing, bought me candy. I'd have known what he looked like, what he sounded like, his mannerisms, how he stood."

He would have been able to ask Charlie the question that's been bothering him. "I want to know what he was afraid of. He did not seem to be afraid of anything," says Bragg. "But I don't think he would have answered me. I think he would have slapped me on the knee or back and would have started telling a story."

Kirkus Review, May 2001
The story of a man who could charm a bird off a wire, beat the tar out of a threat, dandle a baby, tend a still, and smile—no, live—right through the meanest poverty the South could throw at him, from *New York Times* reporter and Pulitzer-winner Bragg *(All Over But the Shoutin'*, 1996, etc.).Bragg's grandfather, Charlie Bundrum, died a year before Bragg was born, so the author "built him up from dirt level, using half-forgotten sayings, half-remembered stories, and a few yellowed, brittle, black-and-white photographs." Speaking in a lovely southern voice out of northern Georgia and Alabama, with a juke in its bones and metaphors to die for, Bragg brings not just Charlie but an entire time and place to life. Charlie was the son of another piece of work, a man who "largely disregarded any laws or influence outside his own will, and some people did not like to look him dead in the eye because it made them feel weak." No stranger to a dust-up himself, Charlie would take the law down a notch if it was too mettlesome, but he had a softer side—one that would play a white-hot banjo, buck-dance under the stars (and under the influence of his own good white whisky, which made him sing rather than cuss), and offer a helping hand whenever the need arose. Most important of Charlie's virtues, from the author's point of view, was the fact that "if he ever was good at one thing on this earth, it was being a daddy." Searching for work (sometimes, just for food), he'd move his family about the wild and dangerous South, a landscape of ridges and hollows and deep woods, ramshackle houses, muddy rivers, water moccasins, primeval catfish (which he caught from a boat made of two car hoods welded together)—but he knew how to make his

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family feel secure and loved.A book that flashes with affection and respect for Charlie and the vanishing culture he represents, one we will be immensely the poorer for losing.

Publishers Weekly Review, August 2001
Following up his bestselling memoir, *All Over But the Shoutin'*, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Bragg again creates a soulful, poignant portrait of working-class Southern life by looking deep into his own family history. This new volume recounts the life of his maternal grand father, Charlie Bundrum, who died in 1958, one year before Rick was born. Lacking a grandfather, the *New York Times* reporter sets out to build one "from dirt level, using half-forgotten sayings, half-remembered stories and a few yellowed, brittle, black-and-white photographs." His investigations in the Appalachian foothills along the Georgia-Alabama border turn up a beloved, larger-than-life rambler who inspired backwoods legend among contemporaries, undying devotion from his wife, Ava, and unabashed love and awe from his large extended family. Big-hearted but flawed, Bundrum was a man of contradiction. Genuinely devoted to his wife and children, he was a tenuous provider (a roofer by trade, he also cooked and frequently tasted his own moonshine) who fiercely defended his clan from trouble and hardship even as he occasionally brought it on them. He lived by a code of country justice that tolerated brawling with lawmen but disdained bullying, distinguished "good, solid biblical cursing" from mere "ugly talk," and forswore spitting in the presence of ladies. Bragg strives for an unvarnished portrait and succeeds, mostly balancing tremendous affection for his grandfather with the recognition that Bundrum, the last of his kind and a connection to a culture of backwoods self-sufficiency long dead in the South, deserves and would demand an honest rendering. "He is so much more precious smelling of hot cornbread and whiskey than milk and honey," Bragg writes. "The one thing I am dead sure of is that his ghost...would have haunted me forever if I had whitewashed him." A man like that, he concludes, "would, surely, want a legacy with some pepper on it." Bragg delivers, with deep affection, fierce familial pride, and keen, vivid prose that's as sharp and bone-bright as a butcher knife. In this pungent paean to his grandfather, Bragg also chronicles a vanished South that like the once-wild Coosa River Charlie liked to ply in homemade boats is becoming too tamed to accommodate those who would carve out a proud if hardscrabble living on its margins. (Sept.) Forecast: Knopf is pulling out all the stops for this; know they've got a winner: 200,000-copy first printing, 19-city author tour, and a nine-copy floor display including audio and large-print editions, and paperback copies of *All Over but the Shoutin'.*

VOYA Review, April 2002
When Bragg first turned his considerable journalistic talent to his family, he provided an unforgettable portrayal of the rural South in *All Over but the Shoutin'* (Pantheon, 1997). Here Bragg focuses on the life of his maternal grandfather, Charlie Bundrum, who died just one year before the author was born. Readers return to the Deep South during the years of the Great Depression and the legend of what it took to keep family together. Moving his family from place to place to find work, food, and shelter, Charlie was most proud of being a daddy. A roofer by trade, Charlie played and sang to a white-hot banjo, was no stranger to whiskey, and fought for what he felt was right. He is a backwoods tall-tale character at the very least. Bragg's wondrous style is filled with emotion and affection for his family members, the land they inhabited, and the stories they recalled. Although his memoir is recommended to all who enjoyed Bragg's first journey into his family's history, this volume reaches deeper into the heart of southern folk and might be used in cultural studies assignments. What made Charlie Bundrum act is a piece of Americana that Bragg highlights for all readers. Junior and senior high schoolers would benefit from reading this marvelous wit and social history. One might hope that Hollywood finds Bragg also.-Nancy Zachary.

Guide from ReadingGroupGuide.com (1)

Spotlight on:
Ava's Man

Discussion Questions:

1. In the prologue, Rick Bragg wonders about his grandfather, "What kind of man was this...who is so beloved, so missed, that the mere mention of his death would make [his family] cry forty-two years after he was preached into the sky?" [p. 9] How does the book answer this question? What kind of man is Charlie Bundrum? Why does his memory evoke such powerful emotions in those who knew him?

2. Bragg says that he wrote this story "for a lot of reasons," one of which was "to give one more glimpse into a vanishing culture" [p. 13]. How does he create a vivid picture of that culture? What does he admire about it? How is it different from "the new South"? What other reasons compelled Bragg to write about a grandfather he never knew?

3. Bragg says that Charlie Bundrum was "blessed with that beautiful, selective morality that we Southerners are famous for. Even as a boy, he thought people who steal were trash, real trash...Yet he saw absolutely nothing wrong with downing a full pint of likker...before engaging in a fistfight that sometimes required hospitalization" [p. 53]. What kind of moral code does Charlie live by? Are his frequent acts of violence justifiable? In what sense can Charlie be called a hero?

4. Charlie is a man of great physical strength and courage, but what instances of kindness, generosity, and caring balance the violence and recklessness in his life? How does the inclusion of this kind of behavior in Bragg's description create a richer and fuller portrait of the man?

5. In speaking of his grandfather's legacy, Bragg says, "A man like Charlie Bundrum doesn't leave much else, not title or property, not even letters in the attic. There's just stories, all told second- and thirdhand, as long as somebody remembers" [p. 18]. What is the value of preserving the kind of stories that Bragg gathers in *Ava's Man?*

6. *Ava's Man* is filled with dramatic confrontations and vivid scenes. What episodes stand out the most? What do these episodes reveal about the character of the Bundrum family?

7. In considering his grandfather's drinking, Bragg writes, "I am not trying to excuse it. He did things that he shouldn't have. I guess it takes someone who has outlived a mean drunk to appreciate a kind one" [p. 133]. What does this passage suggest about Bragg's personal stake in reconnecting with his grandfather? What kind of portrait does he paint of his own father in *Ava's Man*?

8. Charlie Bundrum "was a man who did the things more civilized men dream they could, who beat one man half to death for throwing a live snake at his son, who shot a large woman with a .410 shotgun when she tried to cut him with a butcher knife, who beat the hell out of two worrisome Georgia highway patrolmen and threw them headfirst out the front door of a beer joint called the Maple on the Hill" [p. 8]. In what ways is Charlie free from the constraints of society? What is the cost of this freedom? Is Bragg right in thinking that Charlie's way of living is something that more civilized men envy?

9. Bragg writes that Ava could have had her sister Grace's life, a life of relative wealth and comfort, of fine clothes, good food, and travel, instead of a life of rented houses, poverty, and hard labor in the cotton fields. "She could have hated her life," Bragg admits [p. 153]. Why doesn't she? What does Charlie give her that other men cannot? What kind of woman is she?

Discussion Questions: (continued)

10. Why does Charlie take in Hootie? What does this reveal about his character? What does Hootie bring out in Charlie?

11. Bragg writes that Charlie "could charm a bird off a wire" [p. 45]. What are the charms of Bragg's own storytelling style? Where else does he use colorful similes? In what ways is his narrative voice perfectly suited to his subject matter?

12. What does *Ava's Man* reveal about how the Great Depression affected people in the Deep South, especially those who lived in the foothills? How did it affect the Bundrums specifically? How are they treated by landlords, sheriffs, and others in positions of power?

13. For centuries, recorded history has largely been the account of those who have had the greatest impact on world events. Why is the history of a man like Charlie Bundrum important? In what ways does it offer a door into American history and culture that more conventional histories cannot provide?

14. In the epilogue, Bragg argues that when compared with the new South, Charlie Bundrum seems larger than life, because of "his complete lack of shame. He was not ashamed of his clothes, his speech, his life. He not only thrived, he gloried in it" [p. 248]. What accounts for Charlie's pride? Why is Bragg so proud of him? What does *Ava's Man* suggest about the way in which inner character is more important than external circumstances?